



Sermon Transcript

July 23, 2017

Psalms: Prayers of Faith and Hope

It is Good YOU are Here Today

Psalm 73

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on July 23, 2017 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio copy of the sermon on CD is available by request at (860) 563-8286. An audio version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Psalm 73

¹ Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. ³ For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

⁴ For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. ⁵ They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. ⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. ⁷ Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. ⁸ They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. ⁹ They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. ¹⁰ Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. ¹¹ And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" ¹² Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

¹³ All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴ For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. ¹⁵ If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children. ¹⁶ But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, ¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.

¹⁸ Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. ¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! ²⁰ Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

²¹ When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, ²² I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. ²³ Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. ²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

²⁷ For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. ²⁸ But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

Introduction

What we are doing here this morning is really important. Right now you are setting aside time on the first day of the week to gather with God's people and to worship God. Now some of you are here this morning because you want to be here. And, some of you are here this morning because you have to be here. I read this week of a dad who corrects his kids every time they ask him, "do we have to go to church this Sunday?" His response is, "we never *have* to go to church, rather, we *get* to go to church." Trevin Wax calls that "policing the language of his house" because he wants his kids to see that for their dad, going to church is not a chore, rather it is a privilege."¹ So maybe you are here this morning because you see it as a privilege to be here. Or, perhaps you see it is as a chore. Or, maybe you are here because this is what you do. It is your habit to be here. Or, maybe you are here this morning because you are simply curious. Or maybe you are looking around and you have no idea why you are here. Whatever the reason you are here this morning, it is important that YOU are here.

To which you might say, "well of course, it is good for 'me' to be here." In other words, "I know it is good for me to be here." God has appointed certain means by which we grow in our faith, and the corporate worship of God is one of those means of grace in our lives. Through praising God in song, through the confession of our sin and rehearsing the gospel, through the public reading of the Scripture and prayer, through the preaching of the Word of God and the fellowship with the people of God, we grow in our faith. So yes, I admit, it is good for "me" to be here.

But it is more than that. It is good for "us" that YOU are here this morning. Your presence in this weekly gathering does something for us. Have you ever thought about how your attendance at a Sunday morning worship service has just as much impact on us as it does you? Through your regular attendance on a Sunday morning in our worship service, we get a front row seat—a real live visible demonstration—of how you are walking by faith and trusting in God through whatever circumstances you are facing in life. Watching you live out your faith week after week is an encouragement to those sitting around you. One of the great treasures this church has are the "grey heads" who have been a part of this church family for a good portion of their lives. Their sustained weekly presence among us is a testimony to us that God is faithful and that there is blessing in following God. Their sustained weekly presence benefits us.

One of the things that concerns me is what regular attendance at a Sunday morning worship service has become. Regular attendance on a Sunday morning is no longer defined by weekly gathering together as God's people. A regular attender at a Sunday

morning service is now defined by being present 2.5 Sundays a month.² Stretched out over a period of a year, that means the average attender is here 60% of the time. To put it another way, the average attender misses over twenty Sundays a year. My concern is not to guilt you this morning into gathering weekly with God's people. Rather, my concern is what this trend does to YOU, and quite honestly, what it does to "us." Isn't it interesting how in Hebrews 10 when we are encouraged to not neglect meeting together, "*as is the habit of some,*" that the reason for this appeal is that we might encourage one another. In other words, it is good for us that YOU are here week after week after week.

It is with this in mind that we come to Psalm 73. This is the first psalm of BOOK THREE. And it is a psalm written by Asaph. At the beginning of the psalm, you discover that he had a crisis of faith. He says in verse 2, "*my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.*" He was struggling with what he was seeing in the world around him. He saw people, who had nothing to do with God, and they seemed to be getting along perfectly fine without God. In fact, they were thriving and prosperous. And here he is, trying to do what is right, following God, and he is having a hard time of it. As he was taking all of this in, he couldn't make sense of it. In fact, in verse 16 he says, "*But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task.*"

But then, the whole tone of the psalm changes in verse 17. Trying to understand this seemed to him to be a wearisome task, "*until [he] went into the sanctuary of God.*" It was when he came into the place of worship, his perspective changed. So in some sense, you could say that his coming to the place of worship was a benefit for him. HE was the one struggling with what HE saw in the world and when HE went to *the sanctuary of God* HE benefited from gaining a godly perspective on things. And that is true. But if you look closely at this psalm, it is not just "HE" who benefited from his coming to the sanctuary of God with his struggles and gaining a godly perspective on life.

At the height of his spiritual struggle, he says in verse 15, "*If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' I would have betrayed the generation of your children.*" Had he not gone into the sanctuary of God and had he pursued his wrongheaded thinking to the point where he would have turned away from his faith, it would "betray the generation of God's children." In other words, his absence in the community of God's people would have impacted others.

When we come on a Sunday, out from our solitary struggles into the place where we worship God with the people of God, sure it helps to set us straight. But Kathleen Nielson adds that there is more to it than that. She says of this psalm, "Asaph understands that our individual struggles are not all about us; they are meant to grow us

so that we can not only know God better but also help others know him better—so that God’s family will grow.”³ This is why the psalm ends the way it does in verse 28. *“But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge”* - notice what he says next, *“that I may tell of all your works.”* It is a focus on others. Your presence is good for us.

As we look at Psalm 73, I want to encourage you to make our weekly gathering for worship your priority. I want to give you three reasons why I think this should be a priority in your life. In doing so, I not only want you to consider what your weekly attendance does for you; but I want you to consider what your weekly presence among us does for us.

Life is a Struggle

The first thing we notice in Psalm 73 is that life is a struggle. We all have those things in life that challenge our faith. These are things that cause us to question what we believe. Psalm 73 begins with an affirmation of faith, *“Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.”* Jesus, in the Beatitudes says something similar, *“Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.”* It is a statement that simply affirms what Psalm 1 and Psalm 2, the introduction to the entire book of Psalms, affirms. Psalm 1 says *“Blessed [is the man] who delights in the law of the LORD and on his law he meditates day and night.”* Psalm 2 ends by affirming that there is blessing for the one who takes refuge in God. So you bring all these statements together, and the affirmation we find over and over again in the Bible is that the key to life is to live life with God at the center of your life. Another way to put it is this way; *“Do you want to live ‘the good life?’”* Do you want to get the most out of life? Do you want to know comfort in life and in death? If so, then God must be the center of your life.

Now the only problem with that is that the psalmist is looking around at life and it seems like what he sees six days of the week doesn’t match with what he believes. When he surveys what is going on around him, it appears to him to be the exact opposite of what he believes. From his experience, it seems like those who have little regard for God are the ones who are living the good life. He lays out his observation in verses 4-12. He starts by saying, *“For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.”* In fact, he says in verse 11 that they live as though they are not accountable to God. They live as though their lives are not lived in full view of God. They say in verse 11, *“How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?”* At the very least, they are practical atheists. They may sign on the dotted line that they believe there is a God, but they live

as though they are not accountable to God. And yet, in spite of their disregard for God it appears that they are the ones living the good life. His final assessment of them and what he sees is found in verse 12 where he says that they are “*always at ease, they increase in riches.*” You can almost hear him ask, “Is following God really worth it?”

Furthermore, if you want to add injury to insult or if you want to rub a little salt into his wound, he says in verses 13-14 that he is doing everything he is supposed to be doing and yet he doesn't have it near as good as the irreligious people living around him. He says in verse 14, “*All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.*” In other words, here he is “knocking himself out for God” and doing everything by the book, and yet when he daily measures his life against the ungodly, he is suffering while they are prospering. So, he wonders, “who really is living the good life?” And this leads to a crisis of faith. Is it really true? Is there really blessing in following God?

When you stop and analyze the psalmist's struggle with his faith, the root of his struggle had to do with envy. The diagnosis of his struggle is plainly stated in verse 3, “*For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*” He was really wrestling with the tenth commandment, “*You shall not covet.*” The Puritan, Thomas Watson said that coveting was “a mother sin” because it was the sin that leads to the breaking of all the other commandments.⁴ You could say that it is listed tenth among the Ten Commandments because it is the sin you find lying under the breaking of all the other commandments. This is the inner desire that leads to worshiping other gods. It is the lust that leads to sexual sin or it is the longing that entices you to take what doesn't belong to you. So really, the struggle that he is wrestling with is the issue of contentment. He wants for himself what others have. Ray Ortland outlines the progression of Psalm 73 this way: The problem was that he was envious of the arrogant. His assessment was that they have it good. And his inner cry was, “poor me.”⁵

This is what he saw six days out of the week and this is what caused a crisis in his faith. It is a struggle not uncommon to many of us as we live in a materialistic culture. We often measure “blessing” with the quantity and the quality of our possessions. The same observation made by the psalmist of his day can be made as we look around at our culture and our world. The danger of materialism is that you may be lulled into thinking that at the end of the day you have little need for God. And so it was with many around him and many around us in our culture. In Proverbs 30:8-9 the prayer request is that God would give me *neither poverty nor riches*. Why did he pray that God would withhold riches from him? Because the danger that comes with wealth is that we are tempted to deny our need for God. This was at the heart of the psalmist's struggle as he

wrestled with his envy. He was measuring blessing in life by the quantity and the quality of his possessions. His lack of these things caused him to question whether or not it is worth following God.

Nonetheless, in the midst of his struggle, he made his way “*into the sanctuary of God.*” At the very least, you have to commend him for that. Was he there because he felt it a privilege to be there? On this particular occasion was it a chore to be there? Or was it just out of habit he found his way to the sanctuary of God. I am not sure, but it is good that HE was there. Your struggles with God and with faith, may or may not match the struggle found in this psalm. But you have your struggles as you live out your faith. You have hardships and trials that seem to make life and faith difficult. But don’t let your struggle keep you from coming *into the sanctuary of God.* Why? By coming you will find what you need to help you persevere through your struggle. But we will also benefit as you continue to walk by faith in front of us week after week. Do you know why? We are all struggling with what it looks like to walk by faith. And so, through your weekly presence, in the midst of your weekly struggle, you become a visible example of what it means to walk by faith.

Philip Yancey tells the story in his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace* about serving communion on a particular Sunday. In this church, people come forward to receive communion and on occasion Yancey has had the privilege to serve them the elements that point us to the remission of sin through the body and blood of Jesus. On this particular occasion, he was struck not just by the individuals that came forward to receive communion, but by the stories they represented. More often than not, they were stories filled with struggle. Up came Mabel to the communion rail. Fifty years prior she had been a prostitute. It took seven years of a relationship with Yancey’s wife for her to divulge to his wife that she had sold the only child she had ever had to a couple in Michigan. For years she could never forgive herself and now here she is receiving communion. Along came Adolphus who was permanently scarred emotionally by his experience in Vietnam. He was a bit unstable, somewhat dependent on the good care and patience of this congregation. There was a distinguished older German couple, Christina and Reiner, both Ph.D.’s working at the University of Chicago, but filled with fear for their son who was embarking on a one year mission trip, serving in the slums of Calcutta. Then up came Sarah with a turban covering her bare head because of a brain tumor. There was Michael who stuttered so badly it was painful to watch and Maria who had struggled through several failed marriages.⁶ And yet, in the midst of their struggles, they came *into the sanctuary of God.* And so as Kathleen Nielson says, “that coming from our solitary struggles into the place where we worship God with the people of God sets us straight.”⁷ No doubt, that is what happened to these individuals as well.

But can I tell you what a gift it is to us when you come to this place week after week after week in the midst of your own struggles and doubts. Life is a struggle. And when you come every Sunday, rarely do you leave with all the answers to your struggles and rarely do you leave with perfect resolution to your problems. They are often still there when you leave. But as you walk by faith in front of us in the midst of your struggles, you are used by God to encourage us. It is a tremendous gift to us. But we can't see it if you are not here. But if you are here, God meets you and he strengthens us.

God is Our Portion

So what happened when the psalmist made his way *into the sanctuary of God*? He gained a godly perspective on what he saw in the world. The first thing he was reminded of was that those things he was coveting and those people he envied are short lived. He says at the end of verse 17, "*then I discerned their end.*" They are putting all their eggs in the basket of this life and no matter how long you live, it has a shelf life. It does not last. And he is reminded that someday they will have to give an account for their lives. As Psalm 14 reminds us, the Lord does look down from heaven on the children of man and he does see if there are any who seek after God. It is in this passage where we have the verse that is quoted in Romans 3 that says that when God does look at the heart and state of man that "*they have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; and there is none who does good, not even one.*" To which Paul adds, "*For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*" And so our ultimate hope in this world is not in the stuff of this world. It is in Jesus. It is the cross. It is the grace of God. It is God.

In verse 26 he says, "*My heart and my flesh may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*" In Psalms 16 and 17 there is contrast made between those who find God to be their portion in life and those who find their portion in this life. In other words, if your portion is in this life, you can grab everything you can possibly grab in this life but then someday it is all gone. Back in 2009 I came across an editorial in the *Hartford Courant* written by Judge Robert Satter on what it was like for him to turn 90 years old. He ended up dying two years later after a full and accomplished life. I was sad when I read his editorial because all he had to hold onto was the portion he gained in his life. He talked about having enjoyed life, his family, his career, his hobbies and his Red Sox. He was rehearsing the portion this world offered him. He said the cruelest irony of old age is that now that he finally learned how to drive a golf ball down the middle of a fairway, it doesn't go very far. But the more I read his article, the more I felt the emptiness that comes from a life without God. Listen to some of his reflections. Quoting Thomas Wolfe he wrote, "this wonderful and unique 'I' that never was before and never will be again." He said, "Internally, I am a bundle of memories of people I've

known, events I've experienced, books I've read and poems I can still recite. More and more I live in that interior space, recalling the past. When I die, that presence and circuitry will vanish." In other words, he will cease to exist. Summing it up, he says, "After my death, I will live on in my judicial opinions and my four books, but mainly in the memory of family and friends who loved me. In the end, though, like the men down at Mory's, I 'will pass and be forgotten like the rest.'"⁸

But by coming *into the sanctuary of God* it is like the psalmist is awaked in his spirit. He even confesses in verses 21-22, "*When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.*" Or as Ray Ortland said, He went from looking at the prosperity of others and saying "poor me, they have it so good." To saying, "stupid me, I am the one who has it so good!"⁹ How so? "*Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*" In other words, if we have God through faith in Jesus, we have all we need.

The *ESV Devotional Psalter* puts it this way. "How would you put this in your own words? Consider what Asaph is saying: with God, you are invincible. Nothing can touch you. Your greatest enjoyment—God—can never be taken away from you. In heaven, God is all you want and need. On earth, God is all you want and need. In death or in life, in sickness or in health, even as your body wastes away toward the grave, God is all you want and need."¹⁰ Given all the messages our world throws at us day after day and given all the troubles we deal with in this word day after day and given all the personal struggles we have day after day, I need this weekly reminder as I come in from the world and into the sanctuary of God on a weekly basis. It is here where I am reminded that God is my portion and my strength. And so yes, it is good for YOU to be here so that you can be reminded of these things as well.

In a moment we are going to stand and sing with great conviction, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness." But it is not just the closing hymn to our service this morning. When you stand and sing this hymn with great conviction in the midst of all your stuff, you are saying to all of us standing with you, "it is true!" "I have found God to be my portion and I sing this hymn as a testimony to all of you gathered with me that there is nothing on earth that I desire besides God. I want the children in this church to see me affirming this to be true. I want the teens to see me sing this with great conviction. I want those young adults and those young families to see me sing this hymn with great passion for God." See, it is good for us that YOU are here. We need living testimonies and living

examples that say in the midst of the challenges and difficulties of life that indeed, God is faithful. You are not just singing a hymn. You are not just closing a service. You are giving testimony to all of us that God is your portion in life.

Our Way of Life

Finally, the reason it is important that YOU are here is because this is part of our shared way of life. This is what we are committed to do as we seek to be the presence of Christ in this community. This is not just about whether or not you come to church on Sunday. Rather, this is how we love God and love others. In a few moments we will express our commitment to “maintain unity with my brothers and sisters in Christ.” In order to do that we need to be devoted to a shared life together, we need to worship God together. Murray Lean puts it this way, “In some mysterious way Christ is present among his people when they gather together. Anything that fosters this closeness will enrich the whole church family, deepen its fellowship, and allow us to put into practice what it means to love one another.”¹¹ And so it is good that YOU are here. It is good for you and it is good for us. Our collective presence enables us to be that gospel witness to those who make their way into our worship gathering.

Psalms 73 concludes by saying, “*But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.*” This puts our personal struggles into a bigger picture than just our personal struggles. And I don’t mean to downplay each of our personal struggles. But through our struggles, there is something bigger happening here. God is in the process of drawing the next generation of people to himself, through Jesus. He does that through the mystery of the church, a people gathered in the name of Jesus, expressing their faith in God in the midst of their own struggles. This is our way of life.

Conclusion

It is good YOU are here. Make it your priority to be here week after week after week. Why? No doubt, it will help you as you wrestle with your own personal struggles in life as you seek to follow Jesus. But it also will benefit us as we watch you live our your faith in the midst of your own struggles. Having been here for fourteen years, I know a lot of stories in this room. I know a lot of the journeys and the struggles. The fact that you are here, affirming that God is your portion and that God is faithful is an encouragement to me to keep walking by faith. That is what you bless us with when you are here. So don’t neglect meeting together as some are in the habit. We need YOU!

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- ¹Trevin Wax “3 Reasons You Should See Going To Church As A Privilege, Not A Chore”
www.thegospelcoalition.org April 27, 2016
- ²Murray Lean “The Creeping Trend of Church Absenteeism” www.thegospelcoalition.org April
26, 2017
- ³Kathleen Nielson *What Asaph Knew* www.thegospelcoalition.org November 5, 2010
- ⁴Thomas Watson *The Ten Commandments* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965) 177
- ⁵Ray Ortland “Psalm 73: From Envy to Desire” www.thegospelcoalition.org April 4, 2013
- ⁶Philip Yancey *What’s So Amazing About Grace*
- ⁷Nielson
- ⁸Robert Satter “Turning 90, With My Life In Front of Me” in *The Hartford Courant* August 9,
2009
- ⁹Ortland
- ¹⁰ *The ESV Devotional Psalter* (Wheaton: Chicago, 2016) Psalm 73
- ¹¹Lean

